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SUBJECT: SOUTH INDIAN VIEWS ON U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND THE FIRST 100 DAYS

REF: STATE 21427

¶1. SUMMARY: As suggested reftel, PAS Chennai invited a diverse range of contacts to a "working reception" to solicit their ideas for increasing mutual understanding between India and the U.S. We also asked participants their opinions regarding the new Administration's first 100 days in office. As post prepares its FY-2010 outreach strategy, it intends to incorporate the valuable input received from Indians about how best to engage them. Post intends to conduct a follow-up event at the one year mark of the new Administration to keep the dialogue going. END SUMMARY.

We asked the opinion-makers what they think

¶2. Although we informally solicit ideas and opinions from interlocutors on a regular basis, per reftel, post invited a diverse range of contacts to the Consul General's residence to solicit their thoughts in an open forum held April 18. Approximately fifty opinion-makers attended, including elected student leaders, politicians, secular and religious community leaders, business persons, academics and think tank scholars. Many participants were alumnae of U.S. government exchange programs. This audience enthusiastically gave their views and requested more programs which involved "listening" to the Indian perspective.

Program Format

¶3. After a brief welcome by the Consul General, our Pol/Econ officer outlined the key achievements of the Obama Administration's first 100 days. Then the audience was divided into groups for a discussion of ways in which to enhance mutual understanding between India and the U.S. and to reflect on the new Administration's initial policy directions.

Suggestions regarding Public Diplomacy Outreach in India

¶4. Many of the suggestions for enhancing mutual understanding between India and the U.S. included activities the Mission already conducts. We also got some good suggestions on how to foster greater understanding of the U.S. in India. Post is taking the most valuable suggestions into consideration while planning its outreach calendar for FY 2010.

Suggested Topics for Mission Programs

¶5. Suggested topics for mission programs included: 1) addressing controversial topics, such as U.S. assistance to Pakistan or outsourcing, as new policies are made public; 2) giving maximum publicity to President Obama's new initiatives; 3) sharing information on the Administration's environmental policies; 4) addressing the impression that U.S. visa policies discriminate against Muslims; 5) initiating dialogue about H-1B temporary work visa policies; 6) facilitating interfaith dialogue; 7) promoting student-centered education and interactive teaching strategies; 8)

exchanging ideas on how to strengthen democratic institutions; 9) focusing on the similarities between the two countries; and 10) sustaining dialogue to address myths about America.

Talking Points, Technology, and Translating SPAN

¶16. Several attendees urged that the Consulate engage more regularly with the media and other groups of opinion-makers on new policy initiatives. Engagement on policy issues could help drive the message and avoid misunderstandings taking hold in the public imagination, especially on hot topics like U.S. policy towards Pakistan and Afghanistan, outsourcing, and climate change. Several attendees also suggested greater use of technology to expand the reach of Consulate programs, such as web chats and streaming of seminars, concerts and digital video conferences on the Consulate website. Translating SPAN into South Indian languages would make it accessible to millions of additional readers, one contact noted.

Promoting Linkages, Teaching English and Travel

¶17. Attendees urged the Consulate take a more active role in facilitating linkages between Indian and American counterparts, including think tanks, academic institutions, non-governmental organizations, teacher exchanges, and sister cities. One contact suggested that an office be established to facilitate Indian-American partnerships. Several attendees also requested expansion of the Access English micro-scholarship program and other English Language programs to as many government schools as possible. Participants also advocated for increased travel of Americans to southern India - from the Ambassador in New Delhi to senior level policy-makers, students and scholars from the U.S. - and that visits should include rural areas and smaller cities.

Culture, American Studies and a Digital Video Conference with President Obama

¶18. Attendees suggested more cultural programs that cover a broad range of American music, dance, theater, literature, etc., and include high-profile performers. Several participants offered high praise for the former American Studies Resources Center at Osmania University in Hyderabad and stated that reviving or recreating a center for American Studies in India would greatly contribute to study and understanding of the U.S. The audience applauded the suggestion for a digital video conference or live web chat with President Obama to allow them to directly communicate their ideas to the President.

General Suggestions for Strengthening Indo-U.S. relations

¶19. Participants also offered the following suggestions to improve Indo-U.S. relations, most of which are covered by inter-agency and mission programs: 1) support developing countries' access to carbon-free energy; 2) support Indian counter-terrorism efforts; 3) apply transparent mechanisms when funding is given to Pakistan; 4) negotiate bilateral agreements to address cross-border disputes, especially in cases involving domestic violence; 5) include India as a level playing country in patenting and biotech issues; 6) sign a defense treaty; 7) ease travel restrictions (clearances, visas) between the two countries; 8) avoid protectionism; and 9) provide positive information about India to Americans in the United States to clear misconceptions and advance ties - because greater understanding of India (trade opportunities, educational opportunities, culture, etc.) among Americans would enhance friendship and ties, it is therefore in both countries interest.

What Indians said about the First 100 Days

¶10. Reviews of President Obama's first 100 days were overwhelmingly positive. The Administration's performance and leadership on issues ranging from climate change, women's issues, and America's relationship with the Islamic world were given high marks. Most participants specifically praised President Obama's leadership style, noting his willingness to listen, and expressed high

expectations of his Administration. Post submitted the full text of participant responses to the America.gov First 100 Days blog and the White House website.

11. Comment: Chennai thanks the Department for suggesting this type of outreach activity and, based on the results, strongly recommends it as a means to substantively engage key audiences. Post intends to direct public diplomacy resources to the subject-matter areas mentioned, plans to multiply the benefit of programs through technology, including Adobe Connect, and welcomes ideas from the Department and other posts on how we may take other suggestions forward.

KAPLAN